

CAUSE of ACTION INSTITUTE

Pursuing Freedom & Opportunity through Justice & AccountabilitySM

January 7, 2019

VIA FOIAonline

National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration
Public Reference Facility (SOU10000)
1315 East-West Highway (SSMC3), Room 9719
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Re: Freedom of Information Act Request

Dear FOIA Officer:

I write on behalf of Cause of Action Institute (“CoA Institute”), a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan oversight group advocating for economic freedom and individual opportunity advanced by honest, accountable, and limited government. In carrying out its mission, CoA Institute uses investigative, legal, and communications tools to educate the public on how government transparency, accountability, and the rule of law protect economic opportunity for American taxpayers.¹

By letter, dated December 18, 2018, Michael Pentony, Regional Administrator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (“NOAA”) Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (“GARFO”), advised the New England Fishery Management Council that “the Secretary of Commerce” had “approved the New England Industry-Funded Monitoring Omnibus Amendment, including all the management measures recommended by the Council[.]”² Although NOAA published a notice of availability for the Omnibus Amendment in the *Federal Register*, and solicited public comment on its possible approval, the agency never published any final action notice.³ Administrator Pentony’s letter appears to have been secretly dispatched—the correspondence has not been disclosed on the GARFO website or any fishery bulletin. No other public notice concerning the apparent approval of the Omnibus Amendment has been forthcoming from the agency. From the beginning, the approval process for the Omnibus Amendment has been alarming, and numerous stakeholders have raised due process concerns; these concerns are only heightened by the issuance of Administrator Pentony’s letter nearly a week before the close of the comment period for proposed implementing regulations for the Omnibus Amendment.⁴

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (“FOIA”), 5 U.S.C. § 552, CoA Institute hereby requests access to the following records for the time period of September 19, 2018 to the present.⁵

¹ See CAUSE OF ACTION INST., *About*, www.causeofaction.org/about/ (last visited Jan. 7, 2019).

² Letter from Michael Pentony, Reg’l Adm’r, Greater Atl. Reg’l Fisheries Mgmt. Office, Nat’l Marine Fisheries Serv., to Dr. John Quinn, New Eng. Fishery Mgmt. Council (Dec. 18, 2018) (attached as Exhibit 1).

³ Dep’t of Commerce, Nat’l Oceanic & Atmospheric Admin., Industry-Funded Monitoring Request for Comments, 83 Fed. Reg. 47,326 (Sept. 19, 2018).

⁴ Dep’t of Commerce, Nat’l Oceanic & Atmospheric Admin., Industry-Funded Monitoring Request for Comments, 83 Fed. Reg. 55,665 (Nov. 7, 2018).

⁵ For purposes of this request, the term “present” should be construed as the date on which the agency begins its search for responsive records. See *Pub. Citizen v. Dep’t of State*, 276 F.3d 634 (D.C. Cir. 2002). The term “record” means the

National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration

January 7, 2019

Page 2

1. All records reflecting the Secretary of Commerce's approval of the New England Industry-Funded Monitoring Omnibus Amendment, including all related correspondence between the Department of Commerce (*e.g.*, Office of the Secretary) and NOAA.⁶
2. All records reflecting NOAA's formal consideration and response(s) to issues raised in public comments on the agency's September 19, 2018 notice of availability for the Omnibus Amendment.
3. All correspondence (including e-mail, text/instant messages, *etc.*) concerning final approval of the Omnibus Amendment, and/or the December 18, 2018 letter from Administrator Pentony, sent or received by any GARFO employee and the following individuals:
 - Any member or employee of the New England Fishery Management Council;
 - Any member or employee of the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council;
 - Any member or employee of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission;
 - Any official or employee of the Northeast Fisheries Science Center; and,
 - Any employee or representative of (i) A.I.S., Inc.; (ii) East West Technical Services, LLC; (iii) Fathom Research, LLC; or, (iv) MRAG Americas, Inc.
4. All correspondence (including e-mail, text/instant messages, *etc.*) between and amongst members and/or staff of the New England Fishery Management Council concerning the final approval of the Omnibus Amendment and/or the December 18, 2018 letter from Administrator Pentony.

Request for a Public Interest Fee Waiver

CoA Institute requests a waiver of any and all applicable fees. The FOIA and applicable regulations provide that the agency shall furnish requested records without or at reduced charge if "disclosure of the information is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government and is not primarily in the commercial interest of the requester."⁷

In this case, a waiver of fees is appropriate because responsive records would reflect the agency's consideration of public comments solicited on the Omnibus Amendment. As mentioned, the design and proposal of the Omnibus Amendment, and its industry-funded at-sea monitoring

entirety of the record any portion of which contains responsive information. *See Am. Immigration Lawyers Ass'n v. Exec. Office for Immigration Review*, 830 F.3d 667, 677-78 (D.C. Cir. 2016) (admonishing agency for withholding information as "non-responsive" because "nothing in the statute suggests that the agency may parse a responsive record to redact specific information within it even if none of the statutory exemptions shields that information from disclosure").

⁶ "NOAA" should be interpreted to include all relevant agency bureaus, components, and sub-offices, including the National Marine Fisheries Service and GARFO.

⁷ 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii); 15 C.F.R. § 4.11(l)(1)(i)-(ii); *see also Cause of Action v. Fed. Trade Comm'n*, 799 F.3d 1108, 1115-19 (D.C. Cir. 2015) (discussing proper application of public-interest fee waiver test).

National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration

January 7, 2019

Page 3

requirements, has been especially controversial in the Greater Atlantic region.⁸ The economic impact of the rule will be particularly consequential. NOAA and GARFO have made no attempt to notify the public of the approval of the Omnibus Amendment, which occurred while the agency was still accepting public comments on proposed implementing regulations. The entire rulemaking process, in this instance, has been unusual and suggests improper prejudice by the government towards stakeholders opposed to the Omnibus Amendment.

CoA Institute has both the intent and ability to make the results of this request available to a reasonably broad public audience through various media. Its staff has significant experience and expertise in government oversight, investigative reporting, and federal public interest litigation. These professionals will analyze the information responsive to this request, use their editorial skills to turn raw materials into a distinct work, and share the resulting analysis with the public, whether through the Institute's regularly published online newsletter, memoranda, reports, or press releases.⁹ In addition, as CoA Institute is a non-profit organization as defined under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, it has no commercial interest in making this request.

Request to Be Classified as a Representative of the News Media

For fee status purposes, CoA Institute also qualifies as a "representative of the news media" under FOIA.¹⁰ As the D.C. Circuit recently held, the "representative of the news media" test is properly focused on the requestor, not the specific FOIA request at issue.¹¹ CoA Institute satisfies this test because it gathers information of potential interest to a segment of the public, uses its editorial skills to turn raw materials into a distinct work, and distributes that work to an audience. Although it is not required by the statute, CoA Institute gathers the news it regularly publishes from a variety of sources, including FOIA requests, whistleblowers/insiders, and scholarly works. It does not merely make raw information available to the public, but rather distributes distinct work products, including articles, blog posts, investigative reports, newsletters, and congressional testimony and statements for the record.¹² These distinct works are distributed to the public through various media, including the

⁸ See, e.g., CoA Inst., Press Release: Cause of Action Defends Fisheries from New Proposed Rule (Dec. 13, 2018), available at <https://coainst.org/2Bhrytk>; CoA Inst., *CoA Institute Highlights Deficiencies in Proposed Rule to Shift Burdensome Costs of At-Sea Monitoring to Commercial Fishermen* (Dec. 11, 2018), <https://coainst.org/2SFor5o>; CoA Inst., *Fishermen in New England Face Another Costly Regulation* (Apr. 26, 2017), <http://coainst.org/2owYD5H>; CoA Inst., Press Release: Withdraw Unlawful Plan Forcing Fishermen to Pay for At-Sea Monitors (Apr. 12, 2017), available at <https://coainst.org/2SGcDk5>.

⁹ See also *Cause of Action*, 799 F.3d at 1125-26 (holding that public interest advocacy organizations may partner with others to disseminate their work).

¹⁰ 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(ii)(II); 15 C.F.R. § 4.11(b)(6), (c)(1).

¹¹ See *Cause of Action*, 799 F.3d at 1121.

¹² See, e.g., CoA INST., EVADING OVERSIGHT: THE ORIGINS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE IRM CLAIM THAT ITS RULES DO NOT HAVE AN ECONOMIC IMPACT (Jan. 2018), <http://coainst.org/2mgpYAU>; CoA Inst., *Documents Reveal Special Interest Groups Lobbied HUD for Mortgage Settlement Funds* (Aug. 8, 2017), <http://coainst.org/2yLaTyF>; CoA Inst., *The GSA Has No Records on its New Policy for Congressional Oversight Requests* (July 26, 2017), <http://coainst.org/2eHooVq>; CoA INST., SENSITIVE CASE REPORTS: A HIDDEN CAUSE OF THE IRS TARGETING SCANDAL (Mar. 2017), <http://coainst.org/2y0fbOH>; CoA Inst., *Sec. Vilsack followed ethics guidelines when negotiating his future employment*, (Feb. 3, 2017), <http://coainst.org/2mJljJe>; CoA INST., INVESTIGATIVE REPORT: PRESIDENTIAL ACCESS TO TAXPAYER INFORMATION (Oct. 2016), <http://coainst.org/2d7qTRY>; CoA Inst., *There is No Tenth Exemption* (Aug. 17, 2016), <http://coainst.org/2doJhBt>; CoA INST., MEMORANDUM: LEGAL ANALYSIS OF FORMER SECRETARY OF STATE HILLARY CLINTON'S USE OF A PRIVATE SERVER TO STORE EMAIL RECORDS (Aug. 24, 2015), <http://coainst.org/2eXhXe1>; CoA Inst., *CLA too busy for transparency* (Aug. 11, 2016), <http://coainst.org/2mtzhhP>; *Hearing on Revisiting IRS Targeting: Progress of*

National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration

January 7, 2019

Page 4

Institute's website, Twitter, and Facebook. CoA Institute also provides news updates to subscribers via e-mail.

The statutory definition of a "representative of the news media" contemplates that organizations such as CoA Institute, which electronically disseminate information and publications via "alternative media[,] shall be considered to be news-media entities."¹³ In light of the foregoing, numerous federal agencies—including the Department of Commerce—have appropriately recognized CoA Institute's news media status in connection with its FOIA requests.¹⁴

Record Preservation Requirement

CoA Institute requests that the disclosure officer responsible for the processing of this request issue an immediate hold on all records responsive, or potentially responsive, to this request, so as to prevent their disposal until such time as a final determination has been issued on the request and any administrative remedies for appeal have been exhausted. It is unlawful for an agency to destroy or dispose of any record subject to a FOIA request.¹⁵

Agency Reforms and Congressional Options Before the Subcomm. on Oversight, Agency Action, Fed. Rights & Fed. Courts of the S. Comm. on the Judiciary, 114th Cong. (Aug. 5, 2015) (statement of Erica L. Marshall, Counsel, CoA Inst.), <http://coainst.org/2mJC8DH>; *Hearing on Watchdogs Needed: Top Government Investigator Positions Left Unfilled for Years Before the S. Comm. on Homeland Sec. & Gov't Affairs*, 114th Cong. (June 3, 2015) (statement of Daniel Z. Epstein, Exec. Dir., CoA Inst.), <http://coainst.org/2mrwHr1>; *Hearing on Ongoing Oversight: Monitoring the Activities of the Justice Department's Civil, Tax and Environmental and Natural Resources Divisions and the U.S. Trustee Program Before the H. Comm. on the Judiciary*, 114th Cong. (May 19, 2015) (statement of Daniel Z. Epstein, Exec. Dir., CoA Inst.), <http://coainst.org/2n7LxWG>; COA INST., 2015 GRADING THE GOVERNMENT REPORT CARD (Mar. 16, 2015), <http://coainst.org/2as088a>; *Hearing on Potential Reforms to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Before the H. Comm. on Oversight & Gov't Reform*, 114th Cong. (Feb. 27, 2015) (statement of Daniel Z. Epstein, Exec. Dir., CoA Inst.), <http://coainst.org/2ILsph8>; *Hearing on IRS: TIGTA Update Before the H. Comm. on Oversight & Gov't Reform*, 114th Cong. (Feb. 26, 2015) (statement of Prashant K. Khetan, Chief Counsel, CoA Inst.), <http://coainst.org/2nn5tFJ>; COA INST., GRADING THE GOVERNMENT: HOW THE WHITE HOUSE TARGETS DOCUMENT REQUESTERS (Mar. 18, 2014), <http://coainst.org/2aFWxUZ>.

¹³ 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(ii)(II).

¹⁴ See, e.g., FOIA Request No. HQ-2019-00123-F, Dep't of Energy (Nov. 26, 2018); FOIA Request No. OS-2019-00118, Dep't of the Interior (Oct. 31, 2018); FOIA Request No. 2018-HQFO-01215, Dep't of Homeland Sec. (July 10, 2018); FOIA Request No. CFA2018-05, U.S. Comm'n for Fine Arts (June 25, 2018); FOIA Request F-133-18, U.S. Agency for Int'l Dev. (Apr. 11, 2018); FOIA Request 18-HQ-F-487, Nat'l Aeronautics & Space Admin. (Apr. 11, 2018); FOIA Request 1403076-000, Fed. Bureau of Investigation (Apr. 11, 2018); FOIA Request 201800050F, Exp.-Imp. Bank (Apr. 11, 2018); FOIA Request 2016-11-008, Dep't of the Treasury (Nov. 7, 2016); FOIA Requests OS-2017-00057 & OS-2017-00060, Dep't of Interior (Oct. 31, 2016); FOIA Request 2017-00497, Office of Personnel Mgmt. (Oct. 21, 2016); FOIA Request 092320167031, Ctrs. for Medicare & Medicaid Servs. (Oct. 17, 2016); FOIA Request 17-00054-F, Dep't of Educ. (Oct. 6, 2016); FOIA Request DOC-OS-2016-001753, Dept. of Commerce (Sept. 27, 2016); FOIA Request 2016-366-F, Consumer Fin. Prot. Bureau (Aug. 11, 2016); FOIA Request F-2016-09406, Dept. of State (Aug. 11, 2016); FOIA Request 2016-00896, Bureau of Land Mgmt. (Aug. 10, 2016); FOIA Request 796939, Dep't of Labor (Mar. 7, 2016); FOIA Request 2015-HQFO-00691, Dep't of Homeland Sec. (Sept. 22, 2015); FOIA Request HQ-2015-01689-F, Dep't of Energy (Aug. 7, 2015); FOIA Request 2015-OSEC-04996-F, Dep't of Agric. (Aug. 6, 2015); FOIA Request 15-05002, Sec. & Exch. Comm'n (July 23, 2015); FOIA Request 145-FOI-13785, Dep't of Justice (Jun. 16, 2015); FOIA Request 2015-26, Fed. Energy Regulatory Comm'n (Feb. 13, 2015).

¹⁵ See 15 C.F.R. § 4.3(d); 36 C.F.R. § 1230.3(b) ("Unlawful or accidental destruction (also called unauthorized destruction) means . . . disposal of a record subject to a FOIA request, litigation hold, or any other hold requirement to retain the records."); *Chambers v. Dep't of the Interior*, 568 F.3d 998, 1004-05 (D.C. Cir. 2009) ("[A]n agency is not shielded from liability if it intentionally transfers or destroys a document after it has been requested under the FOIA or the Privacy Act."); *Judicial Watch, Inc. v. Dep't of Commerce*, 34 F. Supp. 2d 28, 41-44 (D.D.C. 1998).

National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration

January 7, 2019

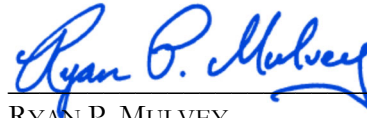
Page 5

Record Production and Contact Information

In an effort to facilitate document review, please provide the responsive documents in electronic form in lieu of a paper production. If a certain portion of responsive records can be produced more readily, CoA Institute requests that those records be produced first and the remaining records be produced on a rolling basis as circumstances permit.

If you have any questions about this request, please contact me by telephone at (202) 499-4232 or by e-mail at ryan.mulvey@causeofaction.org. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Ryan P. Mulvey", is written over a horizontal line.

RYAN P. MULVEY
COUNSEL

EXHIBIT

1



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
GREATER ATLANTIC REGIONAL FISHERIES OFFICE
55 Great Republic Drive
Gloucester, MA 01930-2276

DEC 18 2018

Dr. John Quinn, Chairman
New England Fishery Management Council
50 Water Street
Newburyport, MA 01950

Dear John:

On behalf of the Secretary of Commerce, we approved the New England Industry-Funded Monitoring Omnibus Amendment, including all the management measures recommended by the Council in this amendment.

This amendment establishes a process to standardize future industry-funded monitoring programs for Council fishery management plans (FMPs) and establishes industry-funded monitoring in the Atlantic herring fishery.

Omnibus Measures

The omnibus measures amend all Council FMPs to standardize the development and administration of future industry-funded monitoring programs.

The omnibus measures establish:

- A process for FMP-specific industry-funded monitoring to be implemented via amendment and revised via framework adjustment;
- Standard cost responsibilities for us and the fishing industry;
- Standard administrative requirements for industry-funded observers/monitors and monitoring service providers;
- A process to prioritize monitoring coverage that may be provided by available Federal funding across FMPs for new industry-funded monitoring programs; and
- A process for FMP-specific monitoring set-aside programs to be implemented via a future framework adjustment action.

Standard cost responsibilities and administrative requirements would apply to the existing industry-funded monitoring programs in the Northeast Multispecies and Atlantic Sea Scallop FMPs, but the other omnibus measures would not apply to these existing programs. The Council may incorporate these existing industry-funded monitoring programs into the process to prioritize industry-funded monitoring programs for available Federal funding in a future action. Future industry-funded monitoring programs in the Multispecies and Scallop FMPs would either expand the existing programs or develop new programs consistent with the omnibus measures.



Atlantic Herring Measures

The herring measures establish an industry-funded monitoring program in the herring fishery. Increased monitoring in the herring fishery is designed to address the following goals: 1) Accurate estimates of catch (retained and discarded); 2) accurate catch estimates for incidental species with catch caps (haddock and river herring/shad); and 3) affordable monitoring for the herring fishery. To achieve these goals, the measures require a 50-percent coverage target for at-sea monitoring coverage aboard vessels issued an All Areas (Category A) or Areas 2/3 (Category B) Limited Access Herring Permit. Approximately 40 vessels have Category A or B herring permits, but those vessels typically catch over 95 percent of the total herring harvest.

As recommended by the Council, the 50-percent coverage target includes a combination of Standardized Bycatch Reporting Methodology (SBRM) and industry-funded monitoring coverage. Industry participants would pay for any additional monitoring coverage above SBRM to meet the 50-percent coverage target. Coverage requirements may be waived on a trip-by-trip basis if monitoring coverage is unavailable. Trips that land less than 50 mt of herring and vessels carrying no fish on pair trawling trips would be exempt from the amendment's coverage requirements.

During 2016 and 2017, we conducted an electronic monitoring project aboard herring vessels using midwater trawl gear. The purpose of the project was to evaluate the feasibility of using electronic monitoring to verify catch retention and track discarded catch. In April 2018, the Council reviewed results from the project and approved electronic monitoring, in combination with portside sampling, as a monitoring option for midwater trawl vessels, instead of at-sea monitoring, to meet the 50-percent industry-funded monitoring coverage target. The Council did not recommend requiring electronic monitoring and portside sampling as part of this action; instead it recommended we use an exempted fishing permit (EFP) to further evaluate how to best permanently administer an electronic monitoring and portside sampling program. Additionally, the EFP would provide us with the flexibility to troubleshoot and react to problems, thus helping make the monitoring program more robust. Using the results of the EFP, the Council may consider establishing electronic monitoring and portside sampling requirements via a framework adjustment when it revisits industry-funded monitoring requirements two years after implementation.

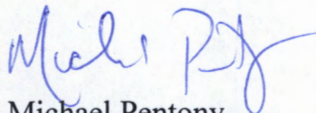
The herring measures maintain the existing requirement that midwater trawl vessels fishing in the Groundfish Closed Areas must carry an observer, but would allow herring vessels to purchase observer coverage to access these closed areas. Herring midwater trawl vessels are currently only able to fish in the Groundfish Closed Areas if they are randomly selected to carry an observer to meet SBRM requirements.

As you are aware, industry-funded monitoring coverage in the herring fishery is contingent upon the availability of Federal funds to support our cost responsibilities. Without additional funding, we would be unable to administer industry-funded monitoring for the herring fishery in a given year. We were awarded funding to administer electronic monitoring for the herring fishery in 2020, but do not currently have funding to implement and administer the at-sea monitoring and portside sampling components. We continue working toward securing funding to administer

industry-funded monitoring in the herring fishery, but the earliest we could implement industry-funded monitoring in the herring fishery is 2020.

We appreciate the Council's and Council staff's efforts to develop this amendment and ongoing efforts to improve monitoring in New England fisheries. Please contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Michael Pentony
Regional Administrator

Cc: Thomas A. Nies, Executive Director, New England Fishery Management Council
Michael Luisi, Chairman, Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council
Dr. Christopher M. Moore, Executive Director, Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council
Robert E. Beal, Executive Director, Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission